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ART. IV.—THE PRINCIPLES OF SOUND SCRIPTURAL EXEGESIS.

THE importance of our subject—especially in days like our own—needs no proof. Before proceeding to lay down what we conceive should be the true principles of our interpretation let us take a brief glance at the past history of Scriptural Exegesis. Christianity has not come down to us through eighteen centuries of advocates and opponents without giving us, whose lot is cast at the end of the nineteenth century, the vantage ground of a long retrospect; and we have, therefore, much to learn from the past, especially on our present subject, as it is one which has naturally engaged the attention of Christian writers from the very first.

As time is limited,¹ it will be sufficient for our purpose to take up the leading theories which have had more or less currency in the Christian world, which we may call, for convenience, the Roman and the Rationalistic. In one theory we have an exaggerated value put upon antiquity, while the other explains away the facts recorded in Scripture. According to the Tridentine Canon, it belongs to Holy Mother Church (*i.e.*, the Roman Church), to judge of the true sense and interpretation of Scripture, and no one is allowed to interpret it contrary to her teaching or the unanimous consent of the Fathers. As the interpretation of the Bible was a crucial point of controversy between our Reformers and the Church of Rome, we find, as we should expect, the language of our Articles very explicit upon this point. Thus the 20th Article, while conceding to the Church power to decree Rites and Ceremonies, and authority in controversies of faith, forbids her ordaining anything contrary to God's Word written, or so expounding one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another, and while allowing her to be a witness and keeper of Holy Writ forbids her departing from the Scriptural rule of Faith in matters "to be believed for necessity of salvation."

According to the Roman view, the authority of the Church naturally resolves itself into that of the Pope, as the supreme head of the Church on earth; and from denial of the right of private judgment the Bible itself cannot be read by the lay people without permission and authorized comment. As for the universal consent of the Fathers, it has often been shown to be a figment; but, like many other bugbears, it is endued with a hundred lives, and in spite of its unreality finds charms for minds of a certain class. Let us take two or three

¹ This paper was read before the Clerical and Lay Conference at Clifton, and the Bristol and Mid-Somerset Clerical Associations.

instances: Rom. vii. 14, "I am carnal, sold under sin," is explained by Origen, Jerome, Ambrose and Athanasius, not of St. Paul, but of the unregenerate man. Augustine takes the opposite view—regards it as the language of a regenerate man, and therefore of St. Paul himself. Chrysostom and Jerome excuse St. Peter's dissimulation as recorded in Gal. ii., while Augustine and Ambrose condemn it as sinful. Again Ambrose took "taste not, handle not" (Coloss. ii. 21) as a warning against putting our hopes in worldly things, but Chrysostom and Theophylact held the passage to be a censure on those who issued such prohibitions. Whittaker divides the false interpretations put forth by the Church of Rome into three classes—some depend on a corruption or mistranslation of the text, some on a perverted sense foreign to the context, others on a mere fancy of some ancient author.

Let us now consider the Rationalizing process.

The great name of Origen in the early Church gave wide influence to his allegorizing views. As man consists of body, soul and spirit, so, he conceived, are there three corresponding senses in which the words of Scripture are to be taken, and he found confirmation of this idea in the water-vessels at Cana (John ii.). "They are said to be for the purification of the Jews, the expression darkly intimating with respect to those who are called by the Apostle Jews secretly, that they are purified by the word of Scripture, receiving sometimes two firkins, so to speak, the psychical and spiritual sense; and sometimes three firkins, since some have in addition to those already mentioned, also the corporeal sense (*Ruffinus*, which is the historical). . . . And six water-vessels are reasonably appropriate to those who are purified in the world, which was made in six days—the perfect number."

I give this as a specimen of his mode of interpretation; but he carried his views so far as to allegorize the creation of the world, the state of Adam in Paradise, our Lord's temptation, and thus deprive them of historic truth. It is sad that so earnest and devout a Christian should have done this, for his principle of interpretation is thoroughly destructive. Origen has had many followers, both within and without the Church, and his views have affected many who would scarcely own their obligations to him. The modern critical school differ widely from Origen in many things, but the result of their criticism on the books of Scripture tends to the same end as the allegorizing views of the old Greek Father by destroying the substratum of facts upon which they rest. It is, of course, true that the Bible is a collection of human writings, and it is upon the human side exclusively that this school regards it; but although there is a sense in which the Bible is like other

books, we must ever bear in mind that there is a sense in which it is unlike all other books—*viz.*, its Divine authorship by the Holy Spirit, by whom its several human authors were instructed both what to write and how to write it. Our modern critics treat the Bible not as a component whole, but rather regard its various parts separately and independently of the rest, forgetful of the danger long ago pointed out by St. Peter of privately interpreting the Word of God. To quote Professor Birks, the Scripture notices of Melchizedek are an example of the confusion which this disintegrating method produces in the unity of the Sacred Volume. First we have an early monogram by an unknown contemporary of Chedorlaomer, then a reference to Melchizedek by David or some later writer; and lastly we have the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews, founding upon these uncertain data one of the most beautiful didactic passages in the New Testament. So much for the history of Scriptural Exegesis.

Let us now seek a safer path—"in medio tutissimus ibis" will prove a true motto. We must avoid the Scylla of Church authority and the Charybdis of Rationalistic irreverence; we must recognize the Divine and human characteristics of the Sacred Volume, but above all we must let Scripture be its own interpreter. "There are indeed shallows in the Bible in which a child may wade, and depths in which an elephant can swim—passages which he may run that readeth—and parts so obscure that neither criticism nor learning can discover their full meaning" (Whittaker).

We shall, if we are wise, avail ourselves of the learning of other days as well as of the critical skill so marvellously developed in our own times—but all these aids, however useful and valuable, will be of little practical use, if we forget the need of the Spirit's illumination to enable us to understand what Holy Men of old wrote under His guidance. Our first object must be to ascertain the exact words of Scripture, and for this purpose we must consult the original tongues in which they were written, as no translation, however accurate and expressive, can suffice. Here textual criticism finds its due place, and serves as a handmaid to disclose the beauties of Revelation. Having ascertained the text, we must proceed to discover the meaning. Some passages are to be taken literally; in others the meaning requires to be taken historically, *viz.*, as addressed to men at a particular time and place. In others, a spiritual sense is the only possible one; for instance, the comment of the Jews upon our Lord's words, St. John vi. 51: "Will this man give us his flesh to eat?" shows the absurdity of pressing the literal sense. In some passages there are two senses—literal and spiritual—but in

these we have to be on our guard against the error of Origen. Some places are clearly figurative, and yet no difficulty of interpretation arises. Thus, in Psalm xci. 13, no literal lion or dragon is intended; and when our Lord used the words, "This is my body," the disciples could not have understood Him to mean that the bread and wine were His natural body, any more than when He said, "I am the door," they conceived Him to mean that He was an actual door. So, again, "If thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out," could not have been meant to be taken literally. Further, remember the Bible is manifold; it contains history, doctrines, miracles and prophecies. The prophetic part of Scripture is confessedly the most difficult portion to interpret. Some prophecies are unfulfilled, others have already received their fulfilment, while some have been partially accomplished and await their fuller and more exact fulfilment. In some cases we look for literal accomplishment, as Christ's second Advent, and the destruction of the earth by fire; and in others we have prophetic symbols foreshadowing future events, as the seals, trumpets and vials in the Apocalypse. Care and discrimination are greatly needed; for instance, Israel and Zion in the Old Testament prophets were for centuries regarded simply as symbols of the Christian Church, and thus the whole future of Israel as a nation was overlooked. So, in the same way, the second and third chapters of the Apocalypse have been interpreted as an historical series of the Church from the days of the Apostles to the end of the present Dispensation—a view which only needs candid examination to show that it is quite untenable.

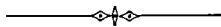
With regard to the facts of Scripture—they are of two kinds—history and miracle. Sometimes (1 Cor. x. 11; Gal. iv. 24) they are said to be types or allegories of spiritual truth—but they are not to be explained away. The Doctrines of Scripture must be taken from a comparison of different passages. Where we have an apparent contradiction, we must beware of pushing one truth to a logical conclusion so as to overshadow other truths as clearly taught elsewhere. For instance, such a text as "The Lord hath laid upon Him the iniquity of us all," is not to be limited in meaning so as to deny the great truth that Christ died for all men, because it appears to contradict other texts which speak of "an election of grace." There is special danger of our bringing our own theories to the Word of God and endeavouring to make it square with them, instead of modifying our views to agree with Scripture. It is this injudiciousness and prejudice of Christian writers which has caused an accusation to be formulated against the Bible that "it is the most uncertain of all books, although we believe all religious truth to be contained in it." Some have been thereby

led to take refuge in the Church of Rome, while others have been drawn into scepticism and infidelity. The true remedy is the one which Scripture itself gives—we must “search,” “dig” beneath its surface for its hidden treasures, and to those who thus diligently seek, the blessings it promises will be given. Prayer, meditation and reading of the Divine Word—these make the experienced interpreter of the sacred Scriptures. “Where meditation shows anything lacking, prayer,” says St. Bernard, “obtains its supply.” Just one word of caution about what may be called catch-passages—where the apparent meaning is not the true one. Every passage must be taken in connection with its context, and not wrested from its natural meaning. The neglect of this simple rule has produced what may be called the monstrosities of interpretation.

Grammatical criticism abounds, while spiritual discrimination is rare in modern commentaries; yet this is ever the most important, and no exegesis can be sound which neglects it. The Scriptures themselves state this, *e.g.*, 1 Cor. ii. 15, “He that is spiritual judgeth all things;” 1 John ii. 20, “Ye have an unction from the Holy One, and ye know all things.” Even plain passages such as Acts xvi. 31, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ;” 1 John i. 7, “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanseth us from all sin,” are sometimes interpreted so as to lose all their simplicity and comfort. Again, it is very important to remember that there are key-words in Scripture—great cardinal truths to lay hold of—such as atonement and propitiation. No exegesis can be sound which overlooks or undervalues this important feature of the Sacred Volume. Nor is this caution unnecessary in the present day, as our controversies show.

Above all, we should remember the saying of an old writer, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ,” and that interpretation of the inspired writings, which does not recognise the Lord Jesus Christ as the sum and substance, “the Alpha and Omega” of them all, must be pronounced to be radically false and unsound.

R. C. W. RABAN.



ART. V.—MISSIONS TO CHILDREN.

“SUFFER little children to come unto Me.” “He took them up in His arms and blessed them.” Something like this should, I think, be the line on which children’s missions ought to be carried out, though, like many other so-called “lines” suggested by Holy Scripture, the explanation